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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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Dead spots in the lawn can be a result of your sprinkler system

The soil is powder dry in many lawns and landscapes all along the Gulf Coast. As temperatures rise to near ninety and above, it only takes a few days for imperfections in our sprinkler systems to become evident. A lot of people will wrongly blame insects or diseases for those sudden problem areas in the lawn. Many of those bad areas, however, are simply a result of imperfections in your irrigation system.

During times of adequate rainfall, rain masks an irrigation system's imperfections. During hot, dry weather a faulty sprinkler head or a poorly designed system will quickly cause a discolored patch of grass.

Some lawns may be suffering because sprinkler patterns do not overlap properly. Some are suffering because trees or other plants are blocking the spray of a sprinkler head. And others are suffering simply because they are not receiving an adequate quantity of water during each watering.

Don't assume that just because the system is coming on that it means that every head is functioning properly or that your system was designed correctly. For this reason, it becomes critical that a homeowner checks their system at least monthly. There are a couple of simple tests that can help you determine if your dry spot is a water issue.

First, check the affected area by taking a soil sample from the root zone. Using a shovel or trowel, take a slice of soil to a depth of six to eight inches. Visually inspect and feel the soil in the root area for moisture. Repeat this procedure in an area of the lawn that looks normal. Compare the two samples. It should be obvious if there's a difference in moisture between the areas tested.

The second test involves placing several empty straight-sided cans, such as soup or tuna cans, in the affected area and several in a normal looking area of the lawn. Turn on your sprinkler system and let it run long enough to collect some water in the cans. Compare the amounts of water collected in the two areas. Again, it should be obvious if there's a difference in the quantity of water applied in the areas tested. These tests are cheaper, less trouble and more environmentally friendly than purchasing and applying pesticides for nonexistent pests.

Every gardener should know how much water their system delivers over a given period of time. Remember that most sandy soils should receive one-half to three-fourths of an inch of water each time you run the sprinklers.

Since systems vary, it is impossible to know how much time your system requires to deliver the recommended amount of water. Pipe sizes, water pressure and the kind of sprinkler heads all affect the time that it takes to deliver a desired amount of water. Calibrating your sprinkler system is the only way to ensure that you are putting on enough water each time you water, but are not wasting water.

To calibrate an in-ground system, place several straight-sided, flat-bottomed cans or pans randomly throughout a zone. For portable, hose-end sprinklers, the containers should be arranged in a straight line away from the sprinklers to the edge of the water pattern.

Turn the water on for 15 minutes. Measure the depth of water in each container. The more precise the measurement, the better your calibration will be. For most cases, measurements to the nearest 1/8 inch are adequate. Add the depths together for all the containers. Divide the combined depths by the number of containers to determine the average amount of watered delivered in that zone in 15 minutes. To determine the irrigation rate in inches per hour, multiply the average depth of water times four. For example, if your system applied 1/4 inch in 15 minutes, you will need to run that zone for 30 minutes to deliver 1/2 inch or 45 minutes to deliver 3/4 inch.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>